

...just a matter of survival.
Insights into a Women`s Vocational Training Project in Afghanistan
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Abstract

Since the Taliban retook power in Afghanistan, the situation for women has deteriorated dramatically. In this article we`ll discuss a vocational training project named 'Empowering Women in Afghanistan' in the field of literacy and tailoring in the north of Afghanistan only a few months before the Taliban took power again. The goal of the project was to educate and empower women to earn their own living and therefore gain a more independent and autonomous status within families and communities.

The lack of access to education, to paid work and the lack of integration of Afghan women into the political system can be seen as structural violence that makes women powerless. With the help of low-threshold educational opportunities such as the project presented here, women can build up resources and social networks. These, in turn, can have an empowering effect on the social group level, because networking creates additional usable resources.

Keywords

1. Afghanistan
2. Democratization
3. Education
4. Empowerment
5. Gender equality
6. Literacy
7. Vocational training
8. Women

1. Introduction and theoretical background

The concept of empowerment was mainly formulated by the US-American social scientists Solomon (1976) and Rappaport (1981). Empowerment, historically linked to the civil rights movement in the USA, feminist movements and the disability rights movement, is an emancipatory guiding concept of social work that aims to strengthen the autonomy, self-determination and influence of people who are socially excluded (Blank, 2018, p. 227). Through empowerment, people become aware of their abilities, develop their own strengths in a targeted manner and learn to use their resources in order to lead a self-determined life (Herriger, 2010, p. 20). The approach of empowerment focuses on the overarching goal of increasing the autonomy of people – in our project especially of women – and therefore enables them to get more independency for themselves and their families and influences communities and society as a whole. Empowerment is thus an important element in increasing the democratization of societies, as people could act more as active and responsible citizens. However, empowerment must not only be approached on the individual psychological level, but also on the social (group-related), institutional, and community-related levels theoretically, conceptually, strategically, and methodically, and must be interlinked in order to be effective (Blank, 2018, p. 328). At the individual level, it is about resource diagnostics, i.e., a close look at all available resources, that support people. Resources, also understood as potentials, abilities, or sources of strength, can be understood as personal and environmental means that

- help to satisfy basic needs as well as
- to cope with and process tasks and demands,
- to secure psychological integrity,
- to find identity,
- to gain control, as well as
- to develop a bio-psycho-social well-being (Herriger, 2006, p. 3).

These resources are the base on which to build social networks on a group-related, institutional and community level. The concept of network is complex. Roughly speaking, we can distinguish between

- primary living environment networks, i.e., networks of relationships that are naturally formed and lived out in personal ties,
- secondary living environment networks, such as associations or self-help groups and
- tertiary, highly organized networks, i.e., professional and institutionalized networks that are specifically designed to support people (Gögercin, 2022, p. 23).

The crucial point with regard to empowerment is that networks bundle and multiply resources. They have a socially integrative and protective effect, particularly at the individual and group level, because they mobilize help in the form of immaterial and material support for the individual member, have an identity-building effect, relieve, buffer and confirm, and at the same time also serve to convey feelings and build trust (Gögercin, 2022, p. 23). Empowerment is based on the assumption that the establishment and further development of living environment networks leads to more usable resources and thus to greater self-empowerment. Viewed in this multidimensional way, empowerment is based on a combination of strengthening people's resilience and targeted networking, in order to overcome power blockages (Blank, 2018, p. 334). This comprehensive approach is inspired by Kabeer (2005), who argued that empowerment must cover three interrelated levels:

- the level of agency in the sense of being able to make one's own decisions,
- the level of resources in the sense of resource availability, and finally
- the level of achievements, i.e. the potential that people have at their disposal to lead a self-determined life (Kabeer, 2005, p. 14).

Fleschenberg (2009, p. 79) pointed out, that in Afghanistan women have to operate in a difficult political and societal environment with a very limited space of agency. In the empowerment concept, therefore, the analysis of discriminatory structural conditions leads to coping strategies and the political focus on access to justice and participation of excluded population groups (Herriger, 2010, p. 13; Walter, 2017, p. 82). Kabeer concludes that, with regard to the empowerment of underprivileged women, three resources as minimum standards should be given special attention:

1. access to education,
2. access to paid work and
3. political representation (Kabeer, 2005, p. 16).

Empowerment and education are proved to be the most important components of democratization in several studies, e.g. by Glaeser et al. (2007), Sanborn and Clayton (2014) and Aléman and Kim (2015). Individual empowerment can lead to the empowerment of society as a whole. The great role of women in the further empowerment, development and democratization of society is evident in these studies. For example, the links and correlations between education and democratization were especially high when women had equal access to education (Sanborn & Clayton, 2014). Therefore, within this project the focus is on the education and empowerment of women, who are extremely marginalized and discriminated against in Afghanistan.

If we look at the situation of women in Afghanistan with regard to access to education and access to paid work, the enormous extent of the exclusion of women in Afghanistan quickly becomes clear, which has once again massively intensified after the Taliban took power again in 2021. According to UN WOMEN (2022, p. 3), girls in Afghanistan who are older than twelve are excluded from school education from grade seven onwards. In April 2022, 80 percent of secondary school girls (850,000 out of 1.1 million in 2021) were prevented from attending classes. Another problem is the very high illiteracy rate. For example, UNESCO (2021, without page) points out that: *"...even though in the past 10 years the literacy rate increased from 32 percent in 2011 to 43 percent in 2018 (female 29.81 percent and male: 55.48 percent), there is a long way to go. Afghanistan's illiterate population (age 15 and above) has been estimated at 12 million (7.2 million female, 4.8 million male) from a total population of 39.6 million people. While many factors contribute to this situation, a key barrier to greater progress is the continuous underfunding of the literacy sub-sector. In addition, literacy and adult learning and education in Afghanistan has not been sufficiently integrated in sector-wide policy and governance and attracts an inadequate proportion of the education budget."* Unemployment is also hitting women hard. By 2020, women accounted for 18.8 percent of the labour force (compared to 81.2 percent for men), already a 28 percent decline (compared to a 12 percent decline for men) (UN-WOMEN, 2022, p. 3). The low participation of women in the labour market has been visible and documented for decades. Evidence shows extremely low levels of economic activity by women in Afghanistan, including in urban areas, and much of it in various forms of self-employment (Kabeer, 2011, p. 10). We see these developments as consequences of violence. In Afghanistan, women are exposed to high levels of direct as well as structural and cultural violence. While direct violence can be attributed to a specific perpetrator like for example the husband, structural violence is inherent in the political and social structures of societies like for example in the patriarchal system (Galtung, 1969). Structural violence is more difficult to address than direct violence, as structural violence is often supported by an oppressive and discriminating culture, *"that can be used to legitimize violence in its direct or structural form."* (Galtung, 1990, p. 291). According to the typology of violence of the 'Theory of structural and cultural violence' of Galtung the

- survival needs,
- the well-being needs,
- the identity needs and the
- freedom needs

of women are threatened and violated in Afghanistan (Galtung, 1990, p. 272). For example, women in Afghanistan under the Taliban regime are neither allowed to earn their own money (threatening of survival needs), nor do they get adequate medical treatment (threatening of well-being needs) nor are they represented in the political system (threatening of identity needs) or have the right to live for themselves without male authority (threatening of freedom needs). It must be said, however, that Women are allowed to work in education (primary schools) and in the health sector. Due to a strict code of conduct, educational restrictions and bans, and enormous pressure on civil society organizations, women have become virtually invisible in the Afghan society: *"Women no longer have any right over their own bodies in Afghanistan and are made invisible. This is what is happening in Afghanistan right now: the complete disappearance of women."* (Nabil, 2022, without page). From this, the following conclusions can be drawn:

1. The restrictions in access to education, to paid work and the lack of integration in the political system of women in Afghanistan can be seen as structural violence, which disempowers women.
2. Empowering women in Afghanistan means providing them with access to education and paid work.

3. With the help of basic education programs like our project, women can build networks. These can have an empowering effect on the social group level, because networking creates additional usable resources that are essential for achieving their goals.
4. Basic educational programs like our project encompass fundamental changes, “concerning women’s sense of identity and self-worth; their willingness and ability to question their subordinate status; their ability to make strategic life choices, including the renegotiation or rejection of inequality in their personal relationships and finally, their ability to participate on equal terms with men in reshaping the society in which they live.” (Kabeer et al. ,2011, p. 5).
5. The educational offers must be based on the existing life worlds and resources of Afghan women and be geared to their reality.

2. Methodological and didactical aspects of the project’s approach to empowering women in Afghanistan

The project aims at enhancing the women’s personal autonomy and independence as well as their professional opportunities in order to make their role more visible in the families, the regional and local communities and society as a whole. The specific goal of the project is to educate and empower them to earn their own living. The project is based on the approach of Paulo Freire (2013). He set the methodological basis in his fundamental book ‘Pedagogy of Autonomy’. The contents taught in different subjects are adapted to local cultural conditions. For example, the topics include:

- issues of children's health or the corona pandemic situation
- the religious reality of women's lives, as for example, the five pillars of Islam or women’s rights and children’s rights within Islam.

This picks up on the realities of life, but also allays the fears that "Western propaganda" would be practiced in the context of further education. The female students were also allowed to choose topics, which are of special interest to them. The aim of this adaptation is to (re)construct social truths so that their implementation is not alien to one's own context. According to Paulo Freire, the learners are guided from naïve everyday knowledge to more well-founded knowledge. The approach links classical school teaching with professional or everyday life. It is not only a technique to quickly build up important content and competences, but also to build awareness and therefore enables people to act as active citizens within their societies (Freire, 2013).

3. The project ‘Empowering women in Afghanistan’

Within the project, women aged 15 to 43 were trained as tailors and made literate over a period of 12 months. They received their own sewing machines and scissors in order to enable them to earn their own livelihood after the training. Thereby, the following Sustainable Development Goals were addressed:

1. Zero hunger: the education in handicrafts and literacy was meant to enable them to work as tailors in order to gain an income and thus solve the problem of food shortage;
2. Qualification: the sustainable and professional training in a recognized profession as well as basic communication techniques should have enabled the women to be more present on the labour market;
3. Gender equality: through proper training as a self-employed dressmaker, the women were supported to act more autonomously and actively and were therefore empowered to make their own decisions and act independently of male authority.

From September 2020 to September 2021, ‘Afghanistan Schulen – Verein zur Unterstützung von Schulen in Afghanistan e.V.’, in cooperation with OASE (‘Organization for Afghan Support of Education’), implemented the project ‘Empowering Women in Afghanistan’ through vocational training in Mazar-i-Sharif. Fifteen young women were taught the craft of tailoring with the aim of building an economic livelihood. Other skills the women needed (reading, writing, math) and health education were also part of the training. The original plan of the ‘Afghan Women’s Association’ was to implement the project and train 30 young women (aged 18-35) over a period of 12 months as tailors and at the same time provide them with literacy training. However, the originally planned cooperation with the ‘Afghan Women’s Association’ had to be cancelled due to a bomb attack. A new cooperation partner with a lot of experience in local educational projects could be found: ‘Afghanistan Schulen e.V.’. After the approval of the Ministry for research of Lower Saxony (Ministerium für Wissenschaft und Kultur MWK), the project could be implemented in Mazar-i-Sharif.

The project was further affected by the Covid-19 pandemic situation and the end of the project in August 2021 coincided with the Taliban coming to power, which subsequently led to a quick end of the project. One teacher migrated to Pakistan, and the local project manager was in the meantime in Taliban custody. Thus, an evaluation of the project was no longer possible. Nevertheless, the continuation of the project and the achievement of the goals of quality education and gender equality can be comprehensively documented, as the local project coordinator pointed out:

"We are therefore very grateful to our project partners that they succeeded in imparting knowledge to the participants. These have learned tailoring, reading, writing and arithmetic and can earn money with their new skills. However, this is extremely difficult now, as some of the clients have no money for new clothes. People have lost their jobs and have no income. It is just a matter of survival at this time. Nevertheless, the new skills are very important; the women can sew clothes for family members and thus save on expenses."

At the beginning of the project, a building was rented; three teachers, a security guard and an assistant were hired. The selection interviews for the training with the women took place in August and September 2020:

"We bought 15 sewing machines, rented a house for the sewing centre and visited all 15 students which were named by the head of the community. Of those 15 students, three of them were not suitable for these courses (one was already a tailor, a second one was very old and sick and the third one herself said that she cannot attend). So, by talking to the head of the community, we replaced these three women with other three and visited their homes and had interviews with them."

After setting up and starting the classes, the women, besides learning to make clothes, gradually also built-up skills in reading, writing and arithmetic: Every day sewing and embroidery was taught for three hours and one hour was dedicated to learning reading and writing in Dari and numeracy. An excerpt from the project manager's report at the beginning of February 2021 documents the success:

"Students sewed dresses seemed better if I compare it with the previous months and their hand writes are also improving. They decorate their class by their hand write texts, which are really motivational for our project as well."

In March 2021, a showroom was opened where the women exhibited their self-made goods. Photographs were taken continuously during the project. The project participants were visibly proud of the progress they made and the pieces of clothing they created. The women also decorated the outside area in front of the building with green plants. The lessons on health topics such as pregnancy complications or children's diseases also arouse great interest among the women. In April 2021, the project manager reported increasing success in handicrafts and mathematics:

"Our students' sewing works are improving more and more. They are sewing different dresses for them and their families these days. Their sewing lesson is on cutting and sewing different sleeves. Mrs.... said that in the New Year, they will have some more orders from outside the centre [...]. While in literacy class, their lesson in Dari is on page 97 (five pillars of Islam) Miss. ... use a fantastic method for delivering the lessons in a good way to the students, she used to take spelling check-up exams every week and the result is very good. At mathematics their lesson is at reading and writing the numbers from 3000 up to 9999, at religious subject their lesson focuses on women's rights in Islam."

In May 2021, the project manager reported successes in reading and writing, as well as a lot of interest in health-related lessons, which was also related to the massive problems caused by Covid-19:

"The students in literacy class are familiar with reading and writing now. Their lessons in Dari subject are on page 125 (The Children's Rights). We provided the Health Care Lecture by Dr. ... for Sewing-Center students. The main topic, which presented was abortion in women and its side effects. The cases of abortion and prevention Covid-19 vaccination included some other discussions about complications during pregnancy and Diarrhea in children [...]. I have to say that students are really interested in each seminar we provide for them, and they by themselves choose the topic they want to have information about for the next seminar."

In the time that followed, the focus was always on dealing with Covid-19, and in late June and July 2021, the training operation was still running 'normally'. In September 2021, we received the following message from the project manager on site:

"From 13th of August 2021 on till now [...] we cannot go to the work, and it hurts so much to see we are at the same situation we were 20 years ago. It seems we are losing all the values we earned during these long years. We struggled all these 20 years to get the rights we lost during Taliban era 1996 until 2000, but now all women lost these values and rights again. In my last email I expressed all my feelings how bad I am feeling these days just being at home and being far from my job and society, for the women that their careers mean a lot to them. Now it is hard to tolerate this situation over here. Every day we are hearing and watching different cases and scenarios from Taliban in the city; the sound of using guns is still annoying us, this morning one of my relatives who is at 6th class at school came to our house; she was telling that Taliban were warning their school every day; even today they took a girl with them. When I asked her 'Do you go to school today?', she said no, my mother doesn't let me go because of these cases happening at schools. As Ms. Tamana said that Taliban start putting their strikes at schools' girls and teachers about Hijab, they want to cover women with a black hijab including all face, hand and foots. In regard to the empowering women project I am in touch with them, some of the students escaped from their place due to this unfair situation, also our literacy teacher Mrs.... migrated to Pakistan, and she will not come back to Afghanistan according to our last contact. Because there are all women working at the center and no man is involved in this project, we decided to start the center today 13th of September and there were eight students present in the class. Students said during a telephone contact I had with them that Taliban came to their mosque many times and announced about their rules. They ordered all women to wear hijab and cover their face, they said not to wear white socks because the white color is the color of their flag, and they will punish persons who wear white socks. They also said that Taliban will start the house-to-house check-up by soon."

4. Survey results and final thoughts

After the project, the women were interviewed with the help of an OASE employee. The study included the project's participants who replied to a quantitative and qualitative questionnaire in written form. They were filled out in their mother tongue and then translated. Twelve out of fifteen women participated; the response rate was 80 percent. The average age was 24 years. The women's low level of schooling was striking. On average, they had attended school for two and a half years (2.6 years), although there was a wide variation here. Four women stated that they had taken lessons from a mullah.

With the help of the training project, an increase in competence was achieved in the areas of reading/post-literacy, writing, math and sewing. For example, five out of twelve women said that the course had helped them excellently to sew on a professional level. Four women said they had learned to sew very well. Three out of twelve women saw excellent progress in reading, four women saw very good progress. Six out of twelve women said they had learned to do math excellently, and two other women rated their progress as very good.

The results of the qualitative survey were particularly revealing with regard to the women's involvement in social networks and their view of their everyday lives and the situation of women in Afghanistan. Eight out of twelve women (66.6 percent) emphasized the particular importance of their primary networks, i.e. the primary family (father, mother, siblings). The importance of friends was rated much lower, with two out of twelve women (16.6 percent) citing friends. In contrast, the role of classmates and teachers in the education project was seen as much more important. Six out of twelve women (50 percent) indicated classmates and teachers as important social resources. The women's everyday life is strongly influenced by religion. All twelve women stated that they pray every day. Housework and cooking are also very important. Nine out of twelve women (75 percent) are involved in this several times a day. It is also remarkable that eight out of twelve women (66.6 percent) reported watching TV every day. Agricultural activities such as feeding cows and taking care of the house/domestic environment were also mentioned. Looking at relevant educational topics, the women showed a particular interest in health-related aspects such as anaemia, pregnancy, nutrition, skin diseases, and domestic and religious topics.

In response to the open-ended question as to which topics were currently of concern to women in Afghanistan, the lack of literacy among women, poverty and women's rights, in particular protection against violence and dress codes, were named. One woman said that female knowledge is not appreciated in Afghan society. The need for sports studios for women, more opportunities for beauty care (cosmetics, hair care) and more artistic expression were also mentioned. These survey results impressively show the deprivations women face in a patriarchal society, which Kabeer et al. (2011, 8) structurally described as a "*marked gender division of roles and responsibility*." To sum up the results of the project, one could state that despite the adverse conditions, twelve women were able to learn the craft of tailoring, developed or built up their reading, writing and math skills and received further training, especially on women's health issues and women's and children's rights. Thus, essential project goals have been achieved.

Due to the political situation, after the project it remained uncertain whether the structural conditions for women in Afghanistan would allow them to sustainably build on the skills developed in the project for leading independent lives. The decades-long exclusion of women in Afghanistan had had massive consequences. At the end of the project, one participant wrote: "*I have learned to write my name.*" There still seemed to be a long way to go for gender equality in Afghanistan.

In view of the current political developments, it must be concluded that, even though the project was a success, the results can't be further built upon due to the massive restrictions the Taliban have imposed on women.

5. Current situation in Afghanistan

According to medica mondiale (2024) the situation for women and girls is dramatic. The Taliban issued a series of decrees and guidelines that violate the human rights of women and girls, including the right to freedom of movement. Our partner from Afghanistan Schulen e.V. reports: "The problem is that we are currently not getting any projects approved for women, only educational projects for girls up to the age of 12. According to Marga Flader from Afghanistan Schulen e.V. it is difficult for NGOs to get projects to support women approved. The word "woman" is not included in the Ministry of Economy's database, in which all projects must be entered. Projects to improve the health care of "families" would have a chance of being approved by the Ministry of Economy and Health. Afghanistan Schulen e.V. has therefore just amended their statutes in order to be able to work in the healthcare sector in the future.

Funding further projects is challenging although living conditions are very difficult:

We have built an elementary school with around 540 pupils (grades 1-6) in a camp for internally displaced persons on the outskirts of Mazar-e-Sharif. The camp is now developing into a settlement. Roads have been built. There are small stores. Living conditions are difficult. Many families still live in tents. Others have small houses with only one room and a toilet. The deep well has recently stopped working, which is causing additional problems.

We had plans for a training center and a health clinic, which we had to abandon because it is currently difficult to implement projects for women. We would be given a plot of land, but we can't use it.

We heard from the schoolchildren that women work in a nearby cookie factory, for example. Men carry loads in the industrial estate nearby. Many children also work to contribute to the family income. Girls weave carpets. Boys work in a brick factory, in gardens or stores or ice cream parlors as cleaners.

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